Windows your way

In every office there's a hero – someone who quietly and efficiently gets on with their job with little fuss or fanfare but whose contribution is invaluable. Windows has its own real troopers: utilities. Jason Whittaker salutes 50 of the best

If we asked you which applications most help your day-to-day productivity, you'd probably name office suites such as Microsoft Office or WordPerfect, email and web browsers, or industry-specific tools for graphics, video or accounting. But what about those programs that keep Windows running, finetuning performance or repairing errors. There are many finely crafted pieces of software that fulfil small but important purposes on a daily basis – for instance, restoring broken links, running multiple desktops and freeing up memory.

While each new release of Windows includes more and more of these handy applets, so further tools are designed and released to carry out particular tasks. Here, we review the best utilities that have made it on to our PCs.

This round-up includes a mixture of completely new utilities and ones that have been significantly improved upon since we last took an in-depth look at this subject. It concentrates on utility suites, the tools that help with disk drives, system performance and the top 10 free utilities no PC owner should be without. Many of the programs listed here are on the cover disc and at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/registered.

Utility suites

Fix-It Utilities 4.0

Fix-It includes a number of tools to maintain and protect your hard drive. SmartDefender warns of any impending problems on your hard disk, while other diagnostic tools track problems to help you with troubleshooting. For instance, the FixWizards make repairing your PC a one-click process. The package includes a virus scanner and file undeleter, but unless money is really tight we recommend you upgrade to SystemSuite 4.0, which includes Fix-It and much more besides.

McAfee Utilities 4.0

McAfee is the cheapest of the utility suites mentioned, but it has little else to recommend it. Most of the interesting activity from McAfee in this area has been in terms of online tools that are accessed across the internet. Nonetheless, Utilities 4.0 does offer features that protect against crashes and enable users to configure their systems, as well as tools for backing up, shredding files and undeleting.

↑ ↗ Ontrack SystemSuite and Norton SystemWorks offer complete sets of tools for protecting and troubleshooting your PC

Norton SystemWorks 2002

SystemWorks is Symantec's all-inclusive collection of applications designed to cover every aspect of PC maintenance and care. The package includes Utilities 2002, with the latest versions of CleanSweep, AntiVirus, Ghost and Roxio GoBack. As well as updating all these programs, this latest version allows you to schedule system maintenance with a single click and includes a Process Viewer to keep track of the applications you are running.

How the suites stack up

Suite	Norton Utilities 2002	SystemWorks 2002	SystemSuite 4.0	Fix-It Utilities 4.0	McAfee Utilities 4.0
Manufacturer	Symantec	Symantec	Ontrack	Ontrack	Network Associates
Contact	020 7616 5600	020 7616 5600	0800 1012 1314	0800 1012 1314	01753 217 920
Website	www.symantec.com	www.symantec.com	www.ontrack.co.uk	www.ontrack.co.uk	www.mcafee-at-home.com
Price	£29.90	£60	£49.99	£34.99	£25
Optimisation tools	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Uninstaller	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Antivirus software	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Crash protection	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Norton Utilities 2002

Still one of the best utility suites around, for the bargain price of £29.90 Utilities includes tools for troubleshooting, optimising performance, undeleting or permanently deleting files, and even a bootable CD should complete failure loom. The latest version includes support for

Windows XP, although some optimisation tools work only with 98 and Me.

Ontrack SystemSuite 4.0

As with Norton's suites, the release of Windows XP has led Ontrack to revise its SystemSuite bundle, which is closest to SystemWorks in terms of its range of

facilities. Included in one box you will find Fix-It Utilities, CrashProof, EasyUninstall, NetDefense, DataEraser and more than 50 other tools to monitor, diagnose, protect and fix your PC. SystemWorks edges ahead in terms of features, but SystemSuite is available at a more competitive price so is better value.
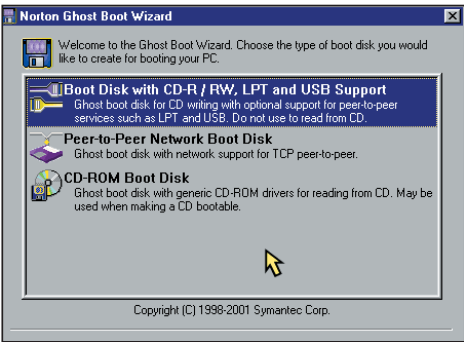
allowing users to convert partitions between FAT, NTFS and Linux formats, and manage multiple operating systems.
• PowerQuest PartitionMagic 7.0 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Hard disk; www.powerquest.com; price: £45.

Symantec Norton Ghost 2002

Norton Ghost offers an easy way to back up and clone disks and drives. The latest release offers PC-to-PC cloning

→ Norton Ghost is easy to use and allows you to make a copy of your hard drive and disks

via USB and support for all current operating systems.
• Symantec Norton Ghost 2002 www.symantec.com; price: £35.

Disks, drives and performance

Cacheman 5.11

Cacheman improves system performance by freeing up more memory and reducing how much your PC pages out files to the hard drive. It's very specific, but is a worthwhile addition to your PC setup.
• Cacheman 5.11 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/System resources tune-up; www.outertech.com; price: free.

CyberScrub

CyberScrub is useful if you need a utility to recover lost data but not if you want to remove it permanently. CyberScrub is one of a number of applications that overwrites deleted files with random data so deleted files are erased forever.
• CyberScrub www.cyberscrub.com; price: $39.95.

DiskState 2.6

Even multigigabyte hard drives fill up after a while, but locating which areas of your hard drive contain the biggest space-hoggers is not always easy. This is where DiskState comes into play. The program can also track down copies of the same file, even if they have different filenames.

→ PC Accelerator boasts 550 tweaks to help you get the best out of your PC

• DiskState 2.6 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Hard disk; www.geekcorp.com; price: £39.95.

HWInfo 32

Windows provides a considerable amount of information on the hardware in your PC, but does not always delve deeply enough to locate data that will be useful when troubleshooting problems. HWInfo (now available for Windows as well as DOS) leaves no stone unturned, providing a comprehensive overview of your hardware.
• HWInfo 32 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Other; www.hwinfo.sk; price: $27.

PC Accelerator XG 1.5

The name says it all: a collection of tweaks and optimisation tools (550 in total) aimed at helping you get the most from your system. The latest version also

includes additional security features to protect your data.
• PC Accelerator XG 1.5 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/System resources tune-up; www.smartalec2000.com; price: $36.
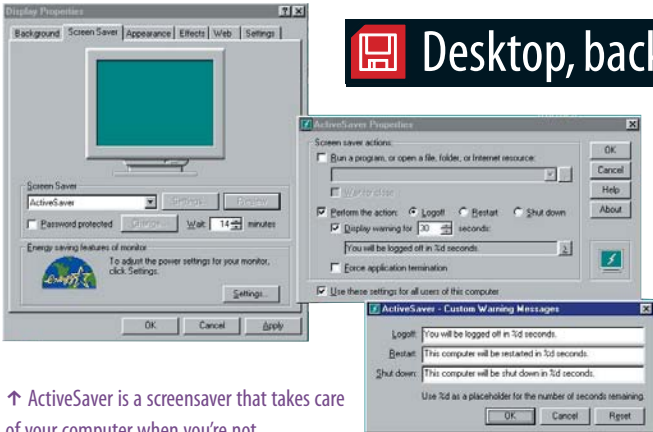
PowerQuest Drive Image 5.0

This backup and cloning utility is a firm favourite. By building images of your hard drive that can be conveniently backed up to CD-R, you can restore a system in minutes and, along with Norton's Ghost, this is the best in the field. This latest version includes support for Windows XP and the QuickImage Scheduler, allowing you to schedule regular backups of hard drives up to 80GB.
• PowerQuest Drive Image 5.0 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Backup; www.powerquest.com; price: £39.99.

PowerQuest PartitionMagic 7.0

Partitioning your hard drive can be a daunting task using Windows-native tools. PartitionMagic's Explorer-style interface enables users to create, resize and merge partitions without losing data. This latest upgrade includes support for Windows XP,

← Make more from your memory by downloading Cacheman, which frees up the bytes to improve system performance

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Desktop, backup and system

↑ ActiveSaver is a screensaver that takes care of your computer when you're not there, scheduling shutdowns, virus scans and defrags

ActiveSaver

ActiveSaver is one of those simple utilities that performs a single task but does it particularly well. It is a screensaver that can run applications and log off or shut down the computer after a preset time. So, for example, you can schedule disk defragments or virus scans for periods of activity. There are other tools that achieve the same thing, but ActiveSaver is simple to use and doesn't cost a penny.
• ActiveSaver PCA Download Directory: Utilities/File management; www.winability.com; price: free.

APC Lapdog

This is one of the most expensive utilities listed here, but the aim of APC Lapdog is to protect costly equipment such as notebook computers. As well as providing two levels of password protection, it is also motion-sensitive, transmitting a message to a pager or SMS-compatible phone if someone attempts to steal your precious portable.
• APC Lapdog www.ci-s.com; price: £99.99.

BossKey 2.0

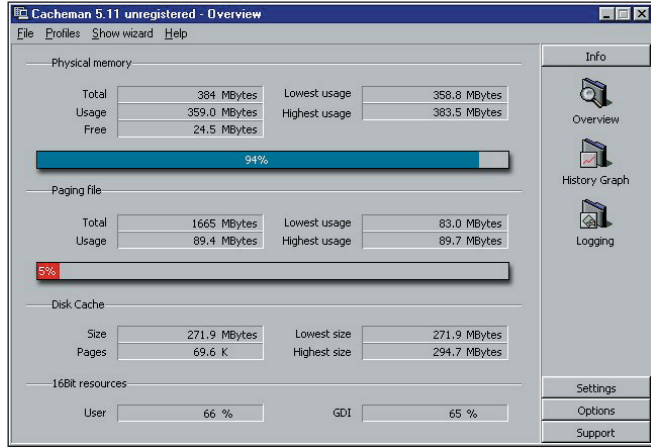What better way to organise your desktop than to have multiple desktops? With BossKey you can have up to 10 virtual desktops, all of which are accessible via hotkeys so you can quickly switch between them. The latest version includes the ability to specify multiple windows that are not hidden when you move between each desktop. Keir.net is an excellent resource for other freeware programs, too.
• BossKey 2.0 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Desktop; www.keir.net; price: free.

Connectix Virtual PC 4.0

Virtual PC originated as a way of allowing Mac users to run PC applications but is increasingly being used to run multiple operating systems on the same computer. You can do this without Virtual PC but it is a cumbersome task. Virtual PC supports all versions of Windows, as well as Linux and you can even run multiple operating systems simultaneously in separate windows. This is not a utility for everyone, but those who require its services will find it invaluable.
• Connectix Virtual PC 4.0 www.connectix.com; price: £85.

Dantz Retrospect Express 5.5

Most PCs go belly up at one time or another, so it's essential you back up to ensure you don't rue the day. There are free utilities in Windows, but sometimes you want a little more control over backups. Retrospect has support for a wide range of removable media, the ability to boot from a CD-R and more options when performing backup and recovery operations. It is a keenly-priced entry-level application for standalone PCs.
• Dantz Retrospect Express 5.5 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Backup; www.dantz.com; price: £33.

eSafe Desktop 3.0

This utility provides antivirus protection for personal users and corporates, along with a number of internet security features. These include internet content filtering, a personal firewall and desktop lockdown features that will ensure your PC is not interfered with when you are away from your desk.
• eSafe Desktop 3.0 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Antivirus; www.esafedesktop.com; price: £42.

→ WinSettings provides a host of options for configuring your PC via right-click menus

Extension Manager 1.1

Another tightly focused tool, Extension Manager has been designed to keep track of the file extension that viruses and Trojan horses hide in order to spread themselves more easily. Even showing file extensions in Windows Explorer will not display some of them. This is where this piece of 'donationware' comes into play.
• Extension Manager 1.1 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/File management; www.vb2java.com; price: free.

PowerBar 1.81

PowerBar is a souped-up toolbar for Windows that allows you to assign icons to quickly launch programs and to set up virtual desktops to organise your work. The latest version includes a number of improvements, including an internet usage dialog box, the ability to monitor connections made by applications and tools to help you organise icons into groups.
• PowerBar 1.81 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Desktop; www.plemsoft.com; price: $20.

Synchronize It 2.75

Aimed primarily at teams that need to share and manage documents across multiple computers, Synchronize It helps users bring folders and files into line. The program can also be used as an automated backup tool, tracking previous versions of documents and providing the most up-to-date version on request.
• Synchronize It 2.75 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/File management; www.grigsoft.com; price: $29.

System Mechanic 3.6

System Mechanic boasts 15 tools for simplifying how you make tweaks and changes to Windows, covering registry and file cleaning, desktop customisation and internet support. It is a neat little utilities suite and the latest version is able to run on Windows XP.
• System Mechanic 3.6 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/System resources tune-up; www.iolo.com; price: $59.99.

WinSettings 4.0

There are lots of settings in Windows that can be changed, but not everyone

↑ A bundle of 15 Windows-tweaking tools, System Mechanic 3.6 enables you to get your system in shape, and is Windows XP-compatible

wants to make the effort to locate them all. WinSettings offers access to these desktop utilities from one convenient menu, as well as 28 options to clean up your hard drive and browser. An image changer converts file types, managing them as icons and controlling screensavers.
• WinSettings 4.0 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Desktop; www.filestream.com; price: $29.95.

Internet

Atomica Personal

Atomica is a nifty reference tool that saves you downloading an entire dictionary or encyclopedia to your hard drive. It searches online reference sites to provide definitions and information about any word you select. Simply hold down the Alt key while you click on a word and the definition pops up.

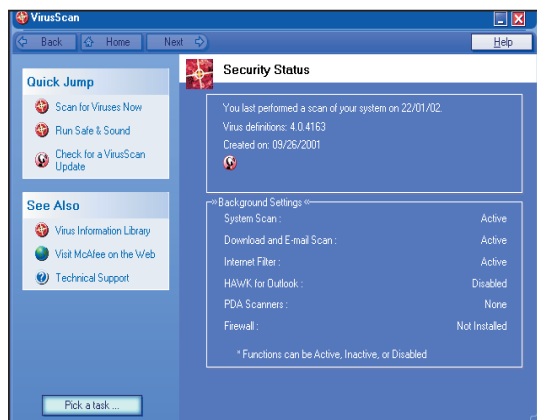• Atomica Personal PCA Download Directory: Internet/Internet tools; www.atomica.com; price: free.

ePrompter 1.05

If you have multiple email accounts across different services (such as Hotmail and AOL), keeping track of your messages can become a chore. Cut the confusion and try ePrompter, a free utility that checks up to eight password-protected accounts from any POP3-compliant server. A nifty icon tray tells you which service is currently holding mail for you.
• ePrompter 1.05 www.eprompter.com; price: free.

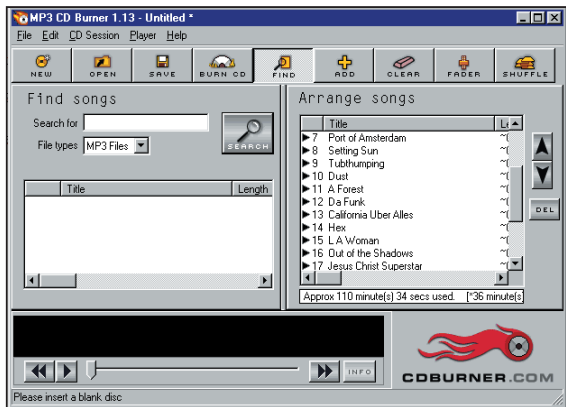← McAfee VirusScan is an important part of the Internet Security suite

FTP Explorer

If you have ever uploaded material to a web server, you'll know that most are designed for one site only. FTP Explorer provides an Explorer-like interface that eases file management, uploads and downloads. It also includes tools for resuming interrupted file transfers and allows you to ascertain the details of such transfers at a glance with its Transfer Manager.
• FTP Explorer PCA Download Directory: Internet/Browsers and clients; www.ftpx.com; price: free for non-commercial use.

McAfee Internet Security 4.0

The main alternative to Norton's package, McAfee Internet Security, combines a similar combination of personal firewall and antivirus software. Norton's Internet Security 2002 would be our first choice as it comes with a few extra goodies, but otherwise the two packages are quite similiar.
• McAfee Internet Security 4.0 www.mcafee.com; price: £49.99.

← With the MP3 CD Burner you can easily arrange your music files and save them to CD

of 300 percent have to be taken with more than a pinch of salt, but as many lines and modems are not configured by default to work at optimum speed, this is a useful speed-boosting tool.
• Modem Booster 3.0 PCA Download Directory: Internet/Internet tools; www.inklineglobal.com; price: $24.95.

MediaRing Talk
MediaRing Talk enables you to make international calls using your PC. The remote connection also has to be running the program for conversation over a PC, but it can connect to regular phones and includes ICQ support for voicechat.
• MediaRing Talk PCA Download Directory: Internet/Internet tools; www.mediaring. com; price: free.

Modem Booster 3.0
ModemBooster works by tweaking your modem to get the best connection possible. The claimed improvements

• Norton Internet Security 2002 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Security; www.symantec.com; £42.71.

PGP Personal Security
In the past we have recommended the free version of Pretty Good Privacy (available from www.web.mit.edu/network/pgp.html), but this requires some knowledge in order to configure it properly. McAfee's version is a commercial product, but is much easier to set up and works with firewalls, instant messaging programs and file erasing utilities as well as email.
• PGP Personal Security www.mcafee-at-home.com; price: £25.

Pop-Up Stopper 2.4
Ad banners and pop-up windows are one of the banes of modern web surfing. You can stop this by turning off Java and JavaScript in your browser but this means you will lose other valuable features. Pop-Up Stopper enables you to surf in peace.
• Pop-Up Stopper 2.4 PCA Download Directory: Internet/Internet tools; www.panicware. com; price: free.

• Performance Diet Pro PCA Download Directory: Home/Fitness; www.health-runr.com: price: £32.

ThumbsPlus 4.5
As hard drives increase in size, so does the difficulty of finding and organising graphics, clip art and images. ThumbsPlus is a database that displays views of images that can be expanded and even edited. Allocate keywords to your images and you can then search through your images and create web pages to display your graphics online.
• ThumbsPlus 4.5 www.cerious.com; price: £49.

VirtualDrive 7.0
Another virtue of capacious hard drives is the fact that CDs can be copied to discs,

→ ZipMagic is a useful utility that compresses folders by up to 95 percent

where they will run much more quickly and conveniently. VirtualDrive creates an image of the CD that includes hidden system files and can also compress files to save space.
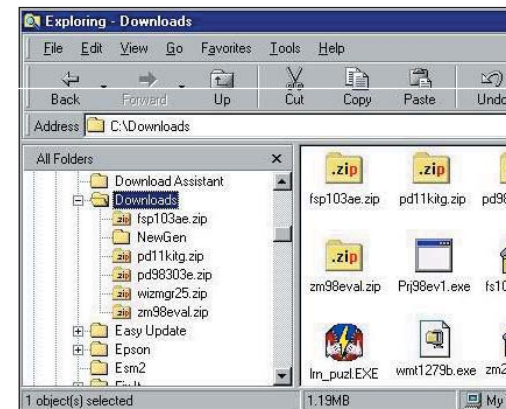• VirtualDrive 7.0 PCA Download Directory: Graphics and multimedia/CD-ROM utilities; www.farstone.com; price: $39.95.

ZipMagic 4.0
Users of Windows Me or XP will be familiar with compressed folders that operate like conventional folders but squeeze their contents by up to 95 percent. ZipMagic from Ontrack includes

similar features in the form of ZipFolders, but can also be used on other versions of Windows.
• ZipMagic 4.0 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Compression; www.ontrack.co.uk; price: £29.99.

Miscellaneous

Acoustica MP3 Burner 1.13
While the latest version of Windows Media Player for XP includes tools to copy CD files to the hard drive, Acoustica offers much greater flexibility when burning MP3 files for your personal use. As well as offering more file formats for your music, you can trim songs, add breaks between tracks and create 80 minute CDs.
• Acoustica MP3 Burner 1.13 PCA Download Directory: Graphics and multimedia/Audio tools; www.acoustica.com; price: $16.95.

Cyberlink PowerVCR II 3.0
PowerVCR is a neat and simple solution for transforming your computer into a PVR (personal video recorder). It can record Mpeg-2 (DVD quality) video to your hard drive and you can use its time-shifting capabilities to watch the beginning of a programme while recording is still in progress. Its editing features are basic, as it concentrates instead on

easy-to-use tools to transform your PC into a video recorder.
• Cyberlink PowerVCR II 3.0 www.cyberlink.com; price: £69.

DVD Genie 4.5
DVD has become one of the fastest-growing entertainment formats ever, and the internet would seem the perfect opportunity to shop around for discs. Most players, however, are restricted to one format, so US DVDs will not play in UK players. DVD Genie is a freeware application that works with popular software
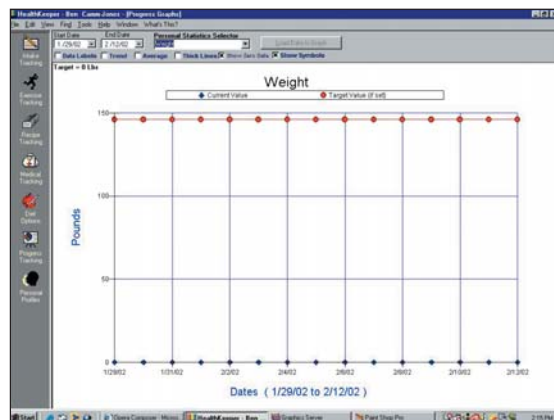
→ Use Performance Diet Pro to keep an eye on your nutritional intake – but be sure to fill in the boxes truthfully

players, enabling you to switch formats for different discs.
• DVD Genie 4.5 www.inmatrix.com; price: free.

Performance Diet Pro
Having expended your energies on keeping your PC in top condition, get your hardware to do the same for you. Performance Diet Pro troubleshoots those thorny fitness niggles, monitors nutritional intake as part of a fitness regime and helps you stay the distance on your training course.

Top 10 free utilities

602 Office Pro
602 Office Pro includes a word processor, spreadsheet, graphics editor and digital photo organiser.
• 602 Office Pro PCA Download Directory: Business/Other; www.software602.com.

Acrobat Reader 5.0
Semi-ubiquitous, but very versatile format for distributing information without loss of formatting or definition.
• Acrobat Reader 5.0 PCA Download Directory: Internet/Browsers and clients; www.adobe.com.

AVG Anti-Virus System
This virus scanner from AVG is the best free version around. Now there's no excuse not to protect yourself.

← Windows Media Player dominates most desktops, but without RealPlayer you will miss out on a wealth of material

• AVG Anti-Virus System PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Antivirus; www.grisoft.com.

BigFix
BigFix is a simple-to-use utility suite that aims to fix your PC before it fails.
• BigFix PCA Download Directory: Utilities/System resources tune-up; www.bigfix.com.

Download Accelerator Plus
Download Accelerator speeds up your web surfing by downloading multiple streams simultaneously.
• Download Accelerator Plus PCA Download Directory: Internet/Internet tools; www.speedbit.com.

ImageForge Basic
If you only require simple image-editing facilities, this program could provide all you need.
• ImageForge Basic PCA Download Directory: Graphics and multimedia/Desktop publishing; www.cursorarts.com.

PowerDesk 4.0
The free version of PowerDesk offers an excellent file manager, with extra features available in the Pro edition for £12.
• PowerDesk 4.0 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/File management; www.ontrack.co.uk.

RealPlayer Basic 8.0
To get the most of webcasts, particularly online radio, make sure you have the freeware version of RealPlayer.
• RealPlayer Basic 8.0 PCA Download Directory: Graphics and multimedia/Audio tools; www.real.com.

WinAmp
If you are unhappy with Windows Media Player (especially as it hogs system resources), try out this excellent audio player, which handles sound files and CDs with grace.
• WinAmp PCA Download Directory: Graphics and multimedia/MP3; www.winamp.com.

ZoneAlarm 2.6
ZoneAlarm is a first-class firewall to foil the attempts of hackers.
• ZoneAlarm 2.6 PCA Download Directory: Utilities/Security; www.zonelabs.com. ■

Load up this month's cover disc for free or trial versions of most of the utilities mentioned here